The (re)construction of Iron Age roundhouses: science and spiritual aura

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Abstract

This paper addresses the Iron Age roundhouses that have been (re)constructed throughout the UK since 1970 and some of the intangible associations that are linked to these structures. How concepts of science and experimentation have been used in constructing the material characteristics of these roundhouses will be explored and it will be shown how alternative practices have drawn more creatively on the idea of the 'symbolic aura' of the past. The popular appeal of Iron Age living and the physicality of the roundhouse has become emblematic of a range of partly contradictory ideals, including those of an egalitarian, sustainable, peaceful and potentially spiritual Iron Age, or 'Celtic', past. This paper addresses how such practices and ideas have developed and also the role of archaeological research in informing and contradicting concepts about the past.

Keywords

Celtic; egalitarian, experimental, heritage, Iron Age; (re)construction; roundhouse, science; sustainability, symbolism.

> There is an intellectual tradition of looking back to our Celtic ancestors to understand something about current issues (Sillitoe 2013, 166).

1. Introduction

This paper explores the 'Iron Age' houses that have been (re)constructed since the early 1970s in England, Scotland and Wales. Steve Townend (2007a, 97) has stated, with slight exaggeration, that 'The reconstructed roundhouse is everywhere: on television, in the literature, in the landscape'. This paper asks why roundhouses are so common in Britain and proposes a complementary approach to the well-established experimental and scientific methodologies articulated by the archaeological (re)construction movement.[1] It seeks to highlight some of the ways in which Iron Age (re)constructions have become imbued with a transformative 'symbolic aura' that contradicts archaeological concepts of temporal distancing (cf. Nora 1989, 8). Although focused on one type of prehistoric British structure, this paper has a wider geographic and temporal relevance since it reflects on how archaeologists involved in physical (re)constructions have often defined their object of interest in a manner that has consciously excluded other ways of thinking about the past. The scientific and methodological approach has dominated archaeological (re)construction. This approach should constitute one element of a wider discipline that seeks to engage with the myriad ways in which materials derived from the past are received and enacted by all who take a stake.

These roundhouses form part of a substantial worldwide collection of (re)constructed buildings dating from earlier prehistory to the medieval period (Stone and Planel 1999; Jameson 2004; Paardekooper 2012; EXARC 2016). The agenda that has been set by the archaeological (re)construction movement is highly methodological and scientific, reproducing ancient buildings from tangible evidence derived from excavation and experimenting to find solutions that can be used to fill gaps in knowledge. (Re)constructive archaeology, as a field of theory and practice, has focused primarily on the development of these experimental and scientific approaches (e.g Stone and Planel 1999; Paardekooper 2012; EXARC 2016). This disciplinary framework has been derived from the 'Western scientific tradition' (Stone and Planel (1999, 1–2). These buildings are often intended to represent particular periods of the past, as special features within 'open-air museums' (Paardekooper 2012, 44–7). An open-air museum is defined as a non-profit

[1] Stone and Planel (1999, 2) have argued for the use of the term 'construction site' rather than 'reconstruction' for these buildings, while Paardekooper (2012, 28–9) has adopted the term '(re)construction'.

permanent institution with outdoor ‘true to scale’ architectural reconstructions that have primarily been based on archaeological sources (EXARC 2016). Roland Paardekooper (2012) has provided a detailed consideration of the challenges posed by the successful development and operation of such venues and his research has been based on detailed surveys of visitors and stakeholders.

One of the first venues at which Iron Age roundhouses were (re)constructed in an experimental manner was at ‘The Iron Age Farm’ at Butser (Hampshire) during the 1970s (Reynolds 1979). Experimentally-based ‘Iron Age’ roundhouses may be visited today at the ‘open-air museums’ at Butser Ancient Farm (Reynolds 1999), Castell Henllys (Mytum 1999) and the Scottish Crannog Centre (Barrie and Dixon 2007). Iron Age roundhouses have also been (re)constructed at forty or more other locations throughout Britain (Figure 1; Table 1).

Why are roundhouse (re)constructions so popular in Britain? Harold Mytum (2003, 96–7) has suggested that the main element of the Iron Age as ‘other’ for visitors to museums and other venues is established through the construction of roundhouses that can be experienced as physical structures. The dominant building type throughout Britain during the Iron Age, roundhouses were constructed with a variety of different materials, including timber, earth and stone (Harding 2009; Sharples 2010, 176–237). Deriving from a long tradition of building in this form that commenced during the Bronze Age, such buildings were also common during the Roman period and particularly in the military-dominated northern areas of *Britannia* (Hingley 1989; Mattingly 2006, 367-378; Fulford and Holbrook 2011, 337). Although rectangular houses were also built during the Iron Age in Britain and roundhouses were common in some other areas of Europe, this structural type has become emblematic of the British Iron Age (Harding 2009, 14–26). It represents a particularly distinctive type of dwelling that has a considerable visual impact (Reynolds 1979, 29). Roundhouse (re)constructions appear similar to structures found in traditional settings across Africa (Reynolds 1993, 93-4), perhaps leading to an association between the idea of living in the past and non-western lifestyles.

Figure 1: The distribution of (re)constructed roundhouses listed in Table 1 (drawn by Christina Unwin.

It will be argued below that, for some people, the physicality of the roundhouse has become emblematic of a supposedly egalitarian, peaceful, sustainable, possibly 'Celtic' and (potentially) spiritual past (cf. Mytum 2003, 96–7).[2] This has partly arisen as a result of

[2] The 'Celtic' aspect of this debate will not be discussed here (although Rhys 2008 has provided some discussion).

the development of the ‘ecological turn’ of the 1970s (Engels 2010, 120–8) and the actions of the participants in the early ‘reality TV’ programme, ’Living in the Past’, broadcast in 1977. Archaeological excavation and research have created some of the materials upon which these ideas of alternative lifestyles have been developed, although archaeologists have usually been critical of those who have drawn spiritual and environmental messages from the Iron Age. Attempts to de-link ideas of ‘Celtic’ origins and Iron Age alternative living from the physical (re)construction of Iron Age roundhouses have not, however, been entirely successful. This paper seeks to conceptualise some of the contradictions that have arisen in a broad field of interpretation that includes archaeological (re)construction and ideas of symbolic aura that relate to alternative lifestyles, sustainability and spirituality (cf. Gibson et al. 2013). Iron Age (re)constructions at particular venues have been selected for discussion here using a methodology that consciously includes a wide variety of roundhouses.

The dividing of the scientific and methodological aspects from the spiritual dimension in this paper is not intended to suggest that these themes constitute entirely self-contained fields of thought and practice. The tendency of the methodology behind archaeological (re)construction to divide description from interpretation, however, will be critically explored.

2. The science of (re)construction at Butser

The sustained programme of research into the (re)construction of Iron Age houses commenced with Reynolds’ seminal work at Butser. This was the location of one of Europe’s earliest open-air museums and one of the first places in the modern era where ‘Iron Age’ roundhouses were built (Paardekooper 2012, 46). Established in 1972 as a centre for research and education, this venue was moved to a new site on two occasions during subsequent decades (Reynolds 1999, 124).[3] The initial remit was to ‘reconstruct a farm dating to about 300 BC’ (Reynolds 1979, 17), but this changed over the succeeding years to focus on the study of agriculture and domestic economy from around 400 BC to AD 400 (Reynolds 1999, 124-6). Reynolds created a research programme at Butser based upon the archaeological information from excavations, developed through the use of a methodology derived from experimental archaeology and the testing of scientific hypothesis (Reynolds 1979, 13–17; 1999, 127–9).

[3] This article only covers Butser’s initial phases of development. For the subsequent history of this venue, which remains open to visitors and includes a stimulating variety of (re)creations of ‘Iron Age’ living, see Reynolds (1999) and Butser (2016).

In exploring Iron Age domestic life and agriculture, Reynolds (1979, 9-10) distanced himself from existing ideas of an unsettled prehistoric 'Celtic' past, stating that an elite warrior class might well have acted as a 'protective layer' for others within society but that the 'vast majority' of the archaeological evidence related to everyday life, including 'broken pottery, fragments of bone, foundations of houses, ditches and banks, pits and postholes.' During the 1970s a new focus of research was developing to address the density of Iron Age settlement and the complexity of the agricultural landscapes (e.g. Cunliffe 1974), reinterpreting previous views of the period that had tended to focus on hillforts and the weaponry of warrior elites. The programme at Butser built on these new perspectives and communicated them to the public.

In keeping with much scientific archaeology, the project drew deeply upon the processualist approach (New Archaeology) that was highly influential at this time (Stone and Planel 1999, 4; Townend 2007b, 148). Reynolds' aim to create Iron Age (re)constructed buildings and to develop an appropriate economy reflected the first two stages on Christopher Hawkes' 'ladder of inference'. Hawkes' influential 'ladder of inference', a work that was adopted by many processual archaeologists, was central to Reynolds' focus on the tangible (Evans 1998, 399, 402). Hawkes defined a hierarchy of topics that archaeologists may address by drawing upon 'material techniques' (Hawkes 1954, 161-162). He observed that it is 'relatively easy' to use inference from 'archaeological phenomena' to determine the '*techniques* producing them, 'fairly easy' to infer '*subsistence-economics*', 'considerably harder' to infer '*social/political institutions*' and 'the hardest … of all' to infer aspects of '*religious institutions* and *spiritual life*' from the material remains.

Schnapp (2002, 140) has argued that archaeology developed from antiquarianism during the nineteenth century through the adoption of what he has called the 'triangulated pillars of archaeological method … typological, stratigraphic and technological approaches'. Between 1830 and 1860 these coordinated methods enabled archaeologists to demonstrate that stories of human origins were 'occluded … by mythic accounts and popular tales'. Archaeology was therefore the product of a long evolution, although it became a scientific discipline in the broader context of positivist science and the industrialisation of society. Schnapp has argued that 'without the tripartite typological, stratigraphic and technological methods which unites them, today's archaeologists would soon revert to the antiquaries that they had once been'. As a result of the use of material remains to make claims to contemporary national identities, since the Second World War archaeologists have often focused their research on undermining the use of ancient

materials in the development of essentialist, nationalistic and racist myths of origin (Harrison 2013, 142-3). The methods identified by Schnapp continue to form vital tools for archaeologists who seek to produce what they see as reliable accounts of the past.

The roundhouses at Butser were based on the information provided by a number of well-excavated Iron Age houses from southern Britain and were constructed in an experimental manner to see how well the built structures would survive over a number of years (Figure 2; Reynolds 1979, 30-45; 1999, 130-131). Reynolds defined an approach which involved drawing upon archaeological data together with the very limited documentary sources from classical writings (1999, 127). He dismissed the idea of using ethnographic parallels, pointing out that, although Iron Age roundhouse reconstructions could resemble structures to be found in Africa, the environment and factors of 'social organisation and tradition' made any parallel between Iron Age British and modern African houses irrelevant (Reynolds 1993, 93-4; cf. Hawkes 1954, 162).[4]

Figure 2: A (re)constructed roundhouses at Butser Ancient Farm (photograph by Richard Hingley, June 2014).

The assumptions derived from working with the data from archaeological excavations were then tested through physical experiments based on hypothesis testing (Reynolds 1999, 127). The philosophy was based upon the idea that data is required in

[4] Despite this observation, it is evidence today that the venues that associate Iron Age life with ideas of alternative living also draw upon examples of housing deriving from ethnographic contexts.

order to reconstruct, but that in its absence the only reliable way to document the past is through experimental methods that can be tested. Often, however, only the bases of post-holes and features of roundhouse dug into the ground survive. This experimentation set out to find a reliable way to test how versions of such recreated elements functioned most efficiently under experimental conditions. Following Reynolds' influential example, the subsequent (re)construction of roundhouses at Butser and at other venues has focused on solving the engineering problems of using the ground plans derived from archaeological excavations to build the physical superstructure (Townend 2007a, 99; 2007b).

Reynolds' initial project also aimed to find evidence for the most appropriate types of crops and animals with which to stock the 'Iron Age' farm. Important and illuminating experiments were developed, including the digging and use of 'Iron Age' storage pits, based upon excavated Iron Age examples (Reynolds 1979, 70-82; Reynolds 1999, 130–1). A fundamental aspect of the development of visitor facilities at Butser, these experiments aimed to focus attention onto the idea of Iron Age farming as living within the constraints of the environment, an issue that has been subsequently developed at a large number of 'Iron Age' (re)construction sites, including open-air museums, eco-centres and spiritual centres. The animals at these venues, in particular, help to encourage visits from families with children (Paardekooper 2012, 65–6).

3. Alternative Iron Age lifestyles at Tollard Royal

The BBC television programme, 'Living in the Past' was filmed and broadcast in 1977 and had direct links with Reynolds' research. This live action documentary was staged at a purpose built 'Iron Age village' at Tollard Royal (Wiltshire; Percival 1980). The project was developed by a TV producer, John Percival, and Reynolds helped to train the participants, guiding the producers of the programme and produced a leaflet for the exhibition that followed (Archaeological Advisors 1977). Although advising on the nature of 'Iron Age' life, Reynolds was unwilling to consider how these people should have been living beyond commenting on certain aspects of the agricultural economy (Percival 1980, 9). The concepts of time and science incorporated in Reynolds' use of Hawkes' 'ladder of inference' emphasised the difficulty of (re)constructing the social, political, religious and spiritual life of Iron Age populations.

Percival developed the idea for 'Living in the Past', drawing on the advice of archaeologists such as Peter Reynolds, Jacky Langley and the 'Committee for Ancient Agriculture' regarding the most suitable livestock, 'blueprints for houses' and relevant tools and techniques (Ibid.). Four buildings were constructed, the large roundhouse as a home

for all the villagers, a pigsty, a hen house and a small roundhouse, based on structures excavated at Glastonbury ‘lake village’ (ibid, 19–21). A group of volunteers, including twelve young adults and three children, were based there to build and then live in the ‘village’ (Figure 3; ibid., 10). They aimed to live as ‘Iron Age’ farmers for a year in wattle and daub houses. Attempts were made to dress them in ‘authentic’ ‘Iron Age’ costumes and it was assumed that they would consume food that they produced themselves (Duguld 2016; Stone and Planel 1999, 4). In a discussion of the programme it was noted that:

> The group did not produce a hierarchy and no natural leaders emerged. Throughout they made general committee-like decisions—perhaps proving that it is impossible to step back in time; the folklore and knowledge of the remote Iron Age having been lost for ever (Archaeological Advisors 1977, 2).

The programme documented both the problems experienced by this community and also their activities, including a re-enactment of a pagan festival that involved the erection and burning of a substantial fifteen-foot tall wicker man (Percival 1980, 43–8), 124–6). Robin Hardy’s successful horror film, *The Wicker Man*, had been released four years previously in 1973.

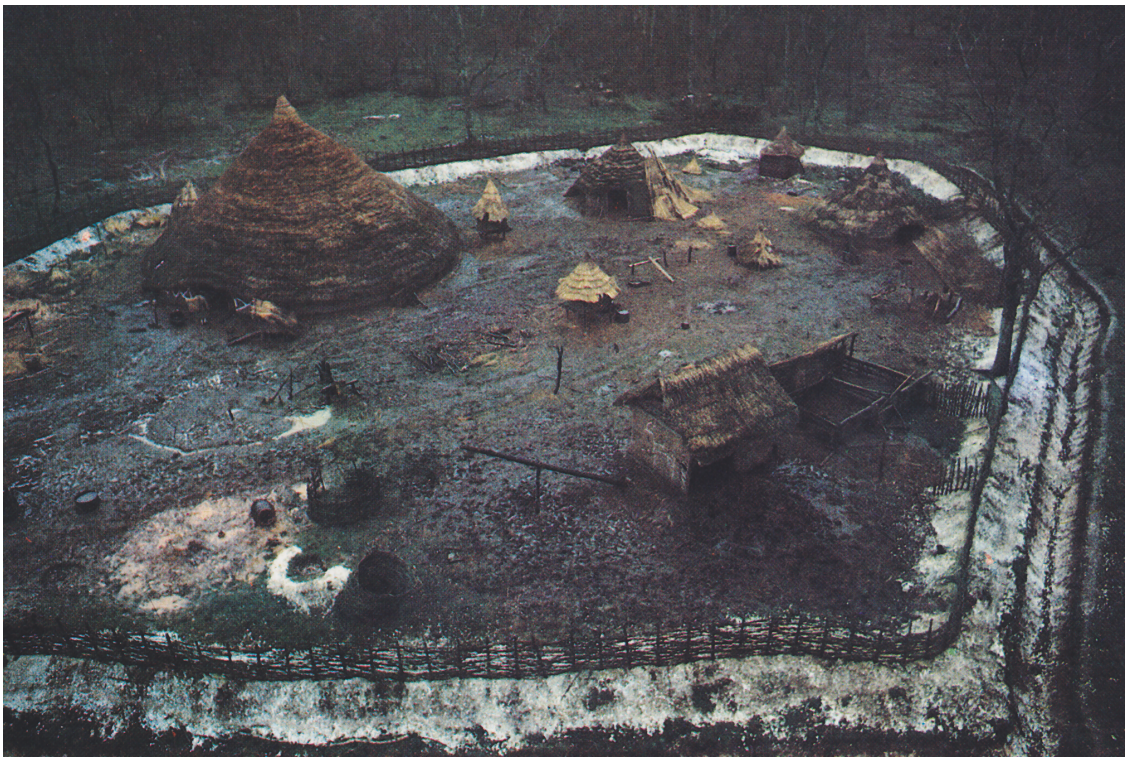

Figure 3: Living in the Past: The Iron Age village at Tollard Royal in 1977 (photograph by Digby Elliot).

Many commentators have been critical of ‘Living in the Past’. Reynolds (1979, 14) observed that, at Butser:

> There is … no thought of playing at being Iron-Age people. Any attempt to relive the past is destined to failure, because the knowledge and experience of previous generations is denied us. To place modern man into a prehistoric context, given the limitations of our knowledge, is only to observe how modern people may react both to the conditions and to each other.

Peter Fowler (1992, 16-17) has observed that the ‘realisation’ of ‘Living in the Past’ in terms of the physical structures at Tollard Royal were ‘as authentic as we are likely to be able to attain with present knowledge ... its flaw had been the people’ who ‘bore little resemblance to Iron Age farmers in their individual and group psychologies’. He noted that the wide public interest in the programme was focused on the ‘social dynamics of these people’, including scenes of nudity, rather than upon the experimental aspects of the project. Mark Duguld (2016) has observed that the handmade clothes of the participants, their shaggy hair and leather jewellery made them ‘almost impossible to distinguish from the hippies of the recent past’. Presumably the reticence of the archaeological advisor to interpret the more symbolic and spiritual elements of ‘Iron Age’ life was partly responsible for this focus on alternative lifestyles.

The French historian Pierre Nora’s seminal article, ‘*lieux de memoir*' (‘sites of memory’) (1989, 20-1), is pertinent in this context. He observed that:

> what makes certain prehistoric, geographical, [and] archaeological locations important as sites is often precisely what ought to exclude them from being *lieux de mémoire*: the absolute absence of a will to remember and, by way of compensation, the crushing weight imposed on them by time, science, and the dreams of men.

Nora was contemplating how the science of historical reasoning imposes an analytical comprehension on places, mitigating against the incorporation of the symbolic aura of these phenomena into the memories of people.[5] Therefore, memory and history, rather then being synonymous, are now taken to appear to be fundamentally in opposition (ibid,

[5] The concept of ‘symbolic aura’ is derived from Basu's adaptation of Nora’s approach to ‘sites of memory’ (2007, 19, 151).

8). Memory is living and in ‘permanent evolution’, while history is the ‘reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer’. Memory becomes something to be deconstructed, while history (or archaeology), always problematic and incomplete, is purportedly distanced from the present in the search for reliability (ibid.). What is lost through history may include the ‘affective and magical … recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic’ (ibid).

The isolating the past (the subject of study) from the present is a vital intellectual tool in archaeology, but the conception that the past and present are separate is also a positivistic abstraction. The act of delimitation on which this technique is based is often elaborated by archaeologists (and historians) through the creation of a linear sense of temporal order. This is achieved through a series of theoretical and methodological procedures that help to create a concrete concept of temporal distance. Archaeological methods for excavation, the creating of typologies and scientific methods of dating seek to provide rigorous ways to create forms of understanding that can be defended as ‘authentic’. This concept of sequence places the subject of our scholarship in a distant position, apparently entirely separated from the world in which we undertake our research and writing (Blain and Wallis 2007, 36).

The lifestyles developed by the Tollard Royal villagers communicated an idea of the ‘Iron Age’ that attracted many viewers. A relatively egalitarian and ecologically sustainable community were portrayed as living in an alternative manner at a time of increasing international concern about environmental degradation, a movement that has been termed the ‘ecological turn’ of the 1970s (Engels 2010, 120–8; Holdgate 1990, 86–90). Public and scientific concern became focused upon the issues of environmental pollution and the growth of agricultural intensification that was transforming the landscape.[6] The roundhouse was becoming emblematic of a range of at least partly contradictory ‘Iron Age’ ideals, including those of a relatively egalitarian, peaceful, sustainable, possibly ‘Celtic’ and potentially spiritual past.

The scientific methodology behind Butser served to project an image of the Iron Age far removed from the present. It seems to only be accessible through a process of scientific experimentation that enabled the (re)construction of the directly tangible aspects of techniques of production, substance and economy. Peter Reynolds' approach to (re)constructing roundhouses was inspirational, although it has left a legacy in that it

[6] Environmental archaeology developed as a discipline during the 1970s and 80s (Branch et al. 2005, 5), also indicating that archaeological research, including the (re)constructions at Butser, were drawing upon wider themes that were of direct concern to the British public.

emphasised certainty and that intended to sidelined the spiritual and social (cf. Mytum 2003, 97).

3. Experiment and the symbolic aura of Castell Henllys

The open-air museum at Castell Henllys has been successively (re)constructed since 1981, occupying the earthwork remains of an enclosed Iron Age settlement (Mytum 2013, 17). The extensive excavations, directed by the archaeologist Harold Mytum, commenced during the early 1980s and ended in 2008. The museum is now an established tourism and education centre with on-site reconstructions that display 'Iron Age' living history (ibid, 20). During its initial (modern) period of (re)construction, Castell Hennlys was developed by the entrepreneur Hugh Foster as a tourist attraction (Mytum 1999, 181–2). Information from Mytum's excavations of some of the roundhouses was used to (re)construct 'Iron Age' buildings directly upon the original archaeological remains (Mytum 1999, 182).

While the houses at Butser were minimally furnished, Foster wanted his roundhouses to look lived-in and souvenirs from the Mediterranean, crude handcrafted objects and 'Iron Age' replicas were scattered around the site (Mytum 2004, 93). Foster intended to present some dramatic sides of Iron Age life, emphasising the domestic, mystical and military aspects, in contrast to the interpretative direction taken at Butser (Mytum 1999, 182). Since there is relatively little reliable evidence for the distribution of activities inside Iron Age roundhouses, the reconstruction of the internal organisation of these buildings can only be speculative (Ballard 2007, 173). A spring on the northwest slope outside the fort was defined as a sacred site, a 'mystic maze' of quartz blocks was laid out close to the site, and a human skull was placed in one of the roundhouses (ibid, 183). Ritual was deliberately emphasised, while military aspects of Iron Age society were exhibited through the exploration of the defences of the fort through information panels and the presence of replica weapons in some of the buildings.

Following the fashion of associating 'Iron Age' (re)constructions with alternative lifestyles, Foster employed people from what Mytum (1999, 184) has termed 'self sufficient alternative communities' to collect reeds, build the roundhouses and help around the site. In conversation Foster realised that some of these individuals were interested in mystical religions and traditional agricultural methods. The result was that, where archaeological information was missing, modern ideas were used to fill the gaps, as in the case of the internal layout of the houses and the planting of crops (ibid). At Butser, great efforts were made to avoid the use of imagination, while at Castell Henllys gaps in archaeological information were actively bridged through a creative approach that drew the past into the

present. Mytum (1999, 185, 192) has written in broadly positive terms about this strategy, arguing that visitors were allowed ‘to participate in the creation of their own visions of the past’ that created ‘innovation and challenge’, although he has also observed that much of this was not consistent with archaeological interpretations.

When Foster died in 1991 the future of the open-air museum was uncertain, but the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park purchased the site and have developed the (re)constructions and interpretations. This new regime has placed more appropriate artefacts in the houses and has partial ‘deconsecrated’ the site by removing the ‘mystic maze’ (Mytum 1999, 191; 2004, 99); the information panels have been updated and guides act out ‘Iron Age life’ for visitors (Mytum 1999, 190). At weekends and key holiday periods during spring and summer interpreters in costume explain the history of the site and demonstrate craft activities (RedKite 2013, 11, 60).

The National Park has continued Foster's tradition of maintaining the religious focus at the spring just at the edge of the site, with the addition of some wooden idols and artefacts (Mytum 1999, 190). Mytum (2013, 24) has observed that this has subsequently become a place of pilgrimage for followers of alternative religions who have placed their own votive offerings in the spring and tied pieces of cloth to the surrounding trees. In 2000 the BBC broadcast the programme ‘Surviving the Iron Age’ which was filmed at Castell Henllys and included three children of ‘Living in the Past’ volunteers in the cast (Mytum 2003, 99; Duguld 2016). The site is visited by re-enactment groups and two members of an Iron Age re-enactment society were married there (Mytum 2013, 24-25). Mytum (2004, 99) has observed that the site was ‘creating its own subculture, working within or beyond the strict control of archaeologists, Park site management, or planning authorities.’ In these terms, the ‘romance of the Celtic free spirit’ developed by Foster is still present to a degree among the official activities of conservation and display (ibid, 92).

This open-air museum demonstrates very effectively how the experimental and scientific agendas behind the (re)construction movement have become partly fused with ideas of alternative lifestyles and sustainable living. The emphasis on (re)constructing ‘Iron Age’ crops and animals, pioneered at Butser, has transformed into a widespread interest in the idea of sustainable ‘Iron Age’ agriculture. This has been most directly shown in the *Interpretation Plan* for Castell Henllys (RedKite 2013), which emphasises the idea that the style of life represented by this open-air museum constitutes an excellent context in which to inform school children about the ideas of sustainable lifestyles. The spiritual aura persists at the site in the form of the spring which is located just beyond the edge of the

open-air museum and slightly difficult for the visitor to locate (Figure 4), although it has little coverage in the *Interpretational Plan*.

Figure 4: The spring at Castell Henllys (photography by Richard Hingley, June 2014).

4. Iron Age roundhouses today

Butser and Castle Henllys both continue to welcome visitors today. These 'Iron Age' venues illustrate living in the past by employing re-enactors and story tellers to entertain and inform visitors (Mytum 2013, 24–5; RedKite 2013, 11, 60; cf. Paardekooper 2012, 48–53). Events such as spring festivals and wicker-man burnings are used to draw in the public. These 'Iron Age' (re)constructions have, in turn, inspired a variety of more or less authoritative approaches to building Iron Age roundhouses.

Although earlier articles have selected sites with reliable and methodologically-sound (re)constructed roundhouses (including Barrie and Dixon 2007; Blockley 1999; Harding 2009, 200–18; Reynolds 1979, 1993, 1999; Townsend 2002, 2007a, 2007b), the research for this paper has pursued a more open approach to identify forty-three venues with roundhouse (re)constructions (Table 1). These roundhouses have been located by searching online for the terms 'Iron Age' and 'roundhouse' and 'Celtic' and 'roundhouse' and through reference to published accounts. A number of (re)constructed roundhouses

for which insufficient information could be found are excluded along with examples that are far too small and, effectively, represent models. Some of these selected roundhouses are now closed, demolished or collapsed, although the majority are intact and are accessible by the public. Several 'Bronze Age' and 'Roman' roundhouses have also been included, since the divisions between the Iron Age and the proceeding and succeeding periods is not always clear-cut.

The forty-four selected venues include those that do not feature displays that are specific to the 'Iron Age' and/or 'Celtic' past, but that have a variety of (re)constructions of varying dates (referenced as 'multiperiod' on Table 1).[7] They include the Ancient Technology Centre, Archaeolink (now closed), Avalon Marshes Centre, Chiltern Open Air Museum, Flag Fen, Park in the Past and Rydale Folk Museum. Many of the other venues that have 'Iron Age' roundhouses, however, are particular focused upon these buildings. In addition to the well-known, experimentally-based, open-air museums, other venues that have adopted a more imaginative and less openly experimental methodology to 'Iron Age' (re)construction include the Cae Mabon Eco Centre, ESCAPE (Eceni Study Centre and Permacultural Experience) and Celtic Harmony Camp.

A focus on the **reliability of the (re)construction** is evident at most of these venues. This varies, however, from an explicit focus on experimental archaeology as a prominent theme to a looser interpretation of how houses are to be (re)constructed. A number of the open-air museums have pursued a comparable agenda to the experimental ideas outlined at Butser and Castell Henllys; for instance at the Ancient Technology Centre, Flag Fen, St Flagans, Archaeolink, Chiltern Open Air Museum, Rydale Folk Museum and The Scottish Crannog Centre (Barrie and Dixon 2007; Townend 2007a; 2007b). This emphasis on the 'authenticity' of plan and structure is evidently not exclusive to the more 'authorised' 'Iron Age' venues, since most of those listed in Table 1 stress the efforts that have been made to establish their roundhouses as 'authentic'. The individuals and communities who built these roundhouses have sought to find reliable ground plans for their structures by studying evidence from excavated Iron Age buildings. The large number of roundhouses excavated in lowland Britain since the 1970s has provided information that can be drawn upon in particular locales to create 'Iron Age' exemplars (Harding 2009).

The 'Iceni Village' is particularly instructive since the (re)constructions at this site have previously been roundly criticised. Marion Blockley (1999, 23) has observed that this

[7] See Table 1 for the location and published references for individual venues mentioned in the text.

place is based on unsound scholarship partly because it is focused on a longhouses as a communal dwelling. Such buildings were common at Iron Age sites on the continent, but have rarely been found in Britain, particularly in northern East Anglia. Blockley has also observed that the gate-house at the site was adorned with a plastic 'blood-soaked' human head on a post, while the interior included a 'snake pit' where 'enemies were thrown'. Blockley has suggested that the venue seems to have been deeply influenced by Scandinavian Bronze Age excavations (hence the longhouse), the Scandinavian mythology of the early medieval period and the exploits of the fictional Second World War flying ace, Biggles. Blockley's comments have focused critique on what can reliably be inferred about Iron Age domestic architecture, observing that the 'Iceni Village' informs the visitor little about the East Anglian Iron Age. It is instructive that this venue is now updating its 'Iron Age' buildings using information derived from Iron Age roundhouses excavated in Norfolk.

In view of such archaeological critiques, much of the publicity material produced by these venues emphasises that the (re)constructed houses have been based on excavated information and that archaeologists have been involved in their planning and construction. This may have been particularly important for roundhouse-building initiatives where communities are seeking public funding, for example from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Certain spiritual and environment centres that do not have an explicitly scientific or environmental agenda have therefore adopted aspects of the theory and methods behind the (re)constructive archaeology movement. Occasionally, those involved in particular (re)constructions admit to a rather less analytical concern with detail, as for example at Lime Tree Farm, where the round 'dwelling place' was never intended to reconstruct a 'traditional Iron Age roundhouse' but was planned to be in keeping with the landscape and the ethos of the farm.

Another important aspect of these places relates to the way that they have drawn upon Iron Age finds and remains to define a **sense of place**. At Barbury Castle and Park Hall individual roundhouses have been constructed near the remains off two well-known hillforts in order to illustrate aspects of these important Iron Age sites that are not visible within the ancient monuments. The Bodrifty roundhouse is based on one of the three roundhouses from the Iron Age settlement located close to the (re)constructed 'Iron Age' house. Built by the farmer in 1999 the roundhouse was reconstructed in 2011 and it is clear that he built it because of his interest in his Iron Age site. At Foxrush Farm, the (re)constructed house has been built close to the spot at which the remains were uncovered, while local remains have also been drawn upon for the roundhouses at

Stanwick Lakes and Trewortha. Evidently, local Iron Age sites are not always necessary to motivate the building of a roundhouse, since many of the sites listed on Table 1 do not seem to have been particularly inspired in this way.

A spiritual theme is prominent at many of these places and is frequently linked to an idea of **sustainability**. The Cae Mabon Eco Retreat Centre in Wales includes buildings that can be rented as retreats from the pressures of everyday life, including the 'Celtic roundhouse' located at the centre and two buildings that draw upon Navaho architecture, a hogan and a lodge. The Centre is as venue to explore alternative and eco-friendly lifestyles, perhaps drawing, in part, on the original inspiration for Foster's development of Castell Henllys. Felin Uchaf is a centre for holistic education, featuring 'ecostructures' such as an Iron Age roundhouse which is particularly used for cultural and artistic activities.

Comparable venues in England include ESCAPE which opened in 2010 but closed one year later. The website noted that this venue was based on an 'Iron Age farmstead' of the 'Iceni (or Eceni)', aiming to depict the period around AD 60.[8] The concept of 'permaculture' was developed at this place to focus on the idea of living within the constraints of the environment. Once again, the idea of sustainable living comes through strongly. The Celtic Harmony Camp is described as an 'Iron Age-like village' and education centre which aims to provide natural and cultural heritage education and includes hands-on events. It is based on several roundhouses and includes a 'Druid's glade'. A website on school trips states that Celtic Harmony Camp 'is a *real* Iron Age settlement' (author's emphasis) that has been offering hands-on heritage education for over fifteen years and employs a 'dedicated' educational team of archers, warriors, storytellers, famers, woodsmen and weavers. The sustainable lifestyle here includes access to a 'solar powered green toilet'. The (re)constructed roundhouse at Lime Tree Farm, built close to a modern stone circle, functions as a spiritual sanctuary and is a nature conservation area.

Sustainable living is emphasised at other venues. Chiltern Open Air Museum includes (re)constructed buildings from different historical periods, including an Iron Age roundhouse furnished for the period around AD 50. The Museum has recently produced a leaflet for school about Iron Age cooking with learning outcomes such as those indicated by 'Discuss the sustainability of Iron Age lifestyle and compare this with our lifestyle in the

[8] This date indicates that, like the 'Iceni Village', ESCAPE drew upon the image of Boudica and the Boudican revolt, which is thought to have occurred in AD 60/61. It always helps to have someone famous associated with a visitor attraction.

21st century.' Other roundhouses listed in Table 1 are the focus for teaching based on the environment, 'Iron Age' technologies and ideas of sustainability.

H**oliday-makers** are attracted to the idea of an alternative lifestyle and some eco-centres and spiritual centres rent their (re)constructed roundhouses to visitors. Georgia Brown (2011), writing in *The Guardian,* subtitled a visit to the Bodrifty Farm roundhouse, 'What better way to get close to Cornwall's ancient history than to enjoy the life of a Celtic chief?' She mused 'I fancy that this is what you might get if BBC's Changing Rooms paid a visit to the set of the Time Team'. The 'centrepiece' of the roundhouse is 'a large canopied four-poster bed, handmade from local oak but piled Princess-and-the-Pea-high with plump duvets in Egyptian cotton. Painted wall motifs have been copied from pots excavated from the village; the beaten earth floor is overlain with rugs; and local artists have contributed sympathetic pieces; such as Iron Age style ceramics by [a] local potter…'. Brown also described a torchlit walk to the toilet in a converted stables. At Uppcott the mini-roundhouse, next to the main structure, features a compost-loo, basins and a hot shower. An online marketing description of the individual roundhouse (re)construction at Marthrown of Mabie states that it is an 'authentic' replica, and this building is available for the public to rent alongside among others such as a Tipi and a Yurt. The roundhouse sleeps sixteen people and has a series of 'Iron Age facilities' including environmentally sensitive toilets and electric lights.

5. Summary: archaeological (re)construction and archaeological theory

This article has focused on the idea that the 'Iron Age' is a creation of the present as much as it is a product of researching the physical relics of the past. As a result, there are very many different ways to think about and to draw upon the available archaeological materials (cf. Gibson et al. 2013). Aspects of the spiritual aura of the 'Iron Age' include 'Iron Age' ritual, as in the case of the sacred spring at Castell Henllys, the 'druid's grove' at Celtic Harmony Camp, and the widespread idea of the Iron Age as a sustainable society. These are aspects of the ways that particular individuals and communities have interpreted the ancient past. They draw in various ways on archaeological research and deserve respect from academics (cf. Blain and Wallis 2007).

Nora's writings have been explored in this paper to address how scientific reasoning and the distancing of the past from the present have served to erode the symbolic aura of the Iron Age as a ritually-imbued ancient past. Part of the theory and methodology behind the (re)constructive agenda at Butser and elsewhere was to challenge the extent to which interpretation is able to explore anything more ephemeral

than the tangible physical traces of the Iron Age past, elements that can be planned and described by archaeologists. This agenda arose in a key period of archaeological research and publication during the 1970s when the image of the Iron Age was changing from one of a warrior-based society to an alternative view of a largely agricultural, decentralised and settled society. Archaeological research since this time has reconstructed Iron Age communities as decentralised, sustainable and egalitarian (Sillitoe 2013). Interpretations of the Iron Age at open-air museums presumably formed responses to this developing agenda, envisaging its communities as agricultural and relatively egalitarian, and often with spirituality and warfare pushed to the margins of interpretation.

It is therefore particularly ironic that archaeologists have been almost unanimously critical of the attempts of others to draw upon the past. The drawing of an uncrossable barrier between past and present has provided little guidance for those who have conceptualised the Iron Age past in more spiritual or communal terms. The pagan community have been drawing upon spiritual elements of the later prehistoric past for well over a century (Gibson et al. 2013; Hutton 2009). Much of their attention has focuses upon megaliths (Blain and Wallis 2007), although offerings are sometimes made at hillforts and sanctuaries to 'Celtic' spirits (cf. Hingley 2015, 176–7). The interests of contemporary pagans have not usually been a priority at open-air museums, although recently some spiritual centres have been established, often with less official input from archaeologists and heritage managers. It is highly evident that ritual permeated Iron Age society (cf. Hill 1989; Waddell 2015), although how archaeologists address ancient spirituality remains a problematic area due to the proliferation of ideas of paganism that seek to draw upon roots in the prehistoric past.

The sustainability agenda is now deeply tied into the Iron Age in a manner that is difficult to comprehend. At some of the venues explored in this paper sustainability constitutes an aspect of the spiritual aura of living in the past. Why the Iron Age should be particularly associated with sustainability is presumably a result of the extent and complexity of the evidence for farming and settlement at this time, combined with the associations of roundhouses with 'ethnic' forms of building and the impact of the early reality TV series set in the Iron Age, 'Living in the Past'. The idea of sustainability distanced from mysticism (e.g RedKite 2013) has been more acceptable for public education, including projects funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. Whether sustainability is a relevant message to draw from the evidence for Iron Age landuse and lifestyle is debatable, since the Middle and Late Iron Age in at least some parts of Britain involved a key period of tree-clearance, agricultural intensification and soil depletion (cf. Allen and

Scaife 2007). Nevertheless, this aspect of the symbolic aura of living in the past appears to have become strongly associated with the physical structure of the Iron Age roundhouse and should not be ignored.

The materials assessed here suggest that the experimental approach to (re)construction has had a considerable impact, presumably partly because it has become tied into ideas of egalitarianism, alternative lifestyles and sustainability. 'Iron Age' communities are imagined in ways that relate closely to how certain individuals may wish to live their lives today. The pursuit of the idea of the 'Iron Age' in this article is intended to encourage those archaeologists who focus on theory and method to turn their sustained attention to how people draw on the past (cf. Atalay 2013). Archaeological critique—'the crushing weight [of] time, science', and the dreams of men' (Nora 1989, 20–1)—has deeply influence the character of the tangible aspects of 'Iron Age' (re)constructions and also the lifestyles that circulate around roundhouses. In order to increase the impact of their work on the intangible associations that adhere to the tangible, archaeologists have needed to become less analytical, more creative and also more tolerant of alternative interpretations. This does not mean that we need to accept all attitudes to the past, especially in these cases in which people seek to use the past to pursue divisive interests (e.g. Wilson 2013; cf. Paardekooper 2012, 40–4). There is a clear need to continue to build on the engagement that is occurring between our disciplines and the communities that we seek to serve and such work should form a focus for future archaeological research. How the 'Iron Age' is recreated through reference to archaeological research requires a far fuller focus of attention than has been paid in archaeological and heritage studies to date.

Acknowledgements

This paper forms an initial output from the project 'Iron Age and Roman Heritages: Exploring Ancient Identities in Modern Britain' (http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/research/directory/ironage-roman-heritages; http://gtr.rcuk.ac.uk/projects?ref=AH%2FN006151%2F1), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under a Standard Research Grant (2016–2019; Project reference: AH/N006151/1). The research for this article formed part of the initial pilot project that established the theoretical and methodological approaches of the project. I am very grateful to Dr Chiara Bonacchi, Dr Fraser Hunter, Dr Tanja Romankiewicz, Christina Unwin and Dr Tom Yarrow for discussions of some of the points raised here and for additional examples of roundhouse (re)constructions.

Figures and tables

Figure 1: The distribution of (re)constructed roundhouses listed in Table 1.

Figure 2: A roundhouse at Butser.

Figure 3: 'Living in the Past' at Tollard Royal.

Figure 4: The sacred spring at Castell Henllys.

Table 1: (Re)constructed roundhouses in England, Scotland and Wales.

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